

Whatever Happened to the “War on Drugs”?

By JAMES G. STAVIDIS



U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration

Two important events last year received little fanfare. First, in March 2007, the U.S. Coast Guard, working with the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) and Panamanian authorities, seized the merchant freighter *Gatun*, bound for Mexico, carrying over 20 metric tons of cocaine—the equivalent of 10 Volkswagen Beetles. It was the largest maritime interdiction of drugs ever made in the Americas, and it denied drug lords over \$300 million in revenue. It would be enough cocaine for all 17 million high school students in the United States to take eight hits of the drug.

Then in September 2007, Colombian authorities captured Diego León Montoya Sánchez, who was one of the world's most dangerous drug traffickers and was responsible for nearly two-thirds of the hundreds of tons of cocaine exported from Colombia each year. Experts attribute nearly 1,500 murders to this ruthless criminal. Through fear and

corruption, Montoya, like Pablo Escobar before him, played a huge, destabilizing role throughout Latin America. His arrest marks a major milestone for Colombia—a nation that has labored for years to build a foundation for legitimate governance and rule of law.

Both events represent tremendous victories, but neither received significant notice. Twenty years ago, drugs were a leading concern in this nation, and solving the drug issue was a point of routine debate. Newspapers featured daily “drug bust” stories on the front pages. Every television station carried stories about the latest efforts in what was termed the “war on drugs.” Congress easily passed the National Drug Control Act in 1992, creating the Office of National Drug Control Policy headed by a Cabinet-level official reporting directly to the White House. Presidential candidates debated the best approach to take in solving the drug problem. As recently as 2000, the movie *Traffic* was a box office and critical

success, nominated for five Oscars and winning four.

Today, though, little is heard about the “war on drugs”—which was probably the wrong metaphor all along. Articles dedicated to the issue are relegated to the back pages, or they are at least six clicks away from the home page online.

Yet illegal narcotics remain a national threat of significant proportion. Drugs kill tens of thousands of U.S. citizens annually. They undermine fragile democracies throughout the Americas, with enormous negative consequences to our nation. Drug trading and its astronomical profits are fuel that drives the vehicle of nascent terrorism throughout the region. The distortions of and costs to the U.S. economy and that of the entire hemisphere are enormous.

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Report Documentation Page			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
<p>Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.</p>				
1. REPORT DATE 2008	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2008 to 00-00-2008		
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Whatever Happened to the 'War on Drugs'?		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER		
		5b. GRANT NUMBER		
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER		
6. AUTHOR(S)		5d. PROJECT NUMBER		
		5e. TASK NUMBER		
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) National Defense University, Institute for National Strategic Studies, 260 5th Avenue SW Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER		
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)		
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)		
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited				
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES				
14. ABSTRACT				
15. SUBJECT TERMS				
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 5
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON	

Here is a hypothesis: *Illegal drug use should return to the national spotlight*. Every bit of effort devoted toward solving the crisis of drug abuse in this country on the demand side, and preventing the flow of illicit drugs on the supply side, is effort well spent toward establishing control at our borders, stabilizing fragile democracies in our hemisphere, directly saving the lives of U.S. citizens, and enhancing our national security.

Challenges of Illegal Drugs

Here in the United States, drug abuse and related criminal activity have killed approximately 120,000 citizens since 2001. That is

health and crime consequences—as well as the loss of productivity suffered from disability, death, and withdrawal from the legitimate workforce—the total societal impact cost to our economy exceeds \$240 billion annually and grows at the rate of 5 percent per year.

Moreover, the negative effects of the drug trade reach far beyond the sale and use of drugs in the United States. Throughout the Americas, drugs undermine fragile democracies. Today, 14 of the 20 nations that are the leading sources for drug shipments to the United States are located in the Americas. In source and transit zone countries throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, violent, well-organized drug

drugs such as cocaine, heroin, and marijuana inextricably links the world drug trade to international terrorism.

The stakes involved are astronomical. According to the 2007 United Nations World Drug Report, virtually all of the world's cocaine comes from coca leaf cultivation in Colombia, Peru, and Bolivia. Cocaine production estimates from these countries reached 984 metric tons in 2006. Worth nearly \$21 billion wholesale, that amount of cocaine could retail on the streets in the United States for over \$105 billion. The circulation of massive amounts of drug money is wreaking havoc on small economies in the Americas. Many of them face a death grip of corruption, greed, and violence.

On a personal level, drug trafficking is an industry that leaves human tragedy and a trail of blood in its wake. Humanitarian crisis follows the drug supply throughout Latin America and the Caribbean region. Drug kingpins are notorious for their horrendous record of abuses, including frequent kidnappings, brutal torture and murder, recruitment and use of child soldiers, and use of antipersonnel landmines. Widespread massacres, merciless killings, extortion, and forced seizure of land from civilians are common.

Cocaine trafficking from source countries in Latin America through the Caribbean to destinations in Europe and the United States remains the leading cause of most of the violent crime throughout the Latin American region. The current murder rate of over 30 per 100,000 inhabitants per year rivals the most troubled areas of southern and western Africa. Largely due to successful interdiction at sea and in the air, land routes through Mexico have become the primary route for South American cocaine into the United States. As a result, Mexico has found itself in the middle of an all-out war against competing drug lords. Cartels in northern Mexico seeking control of the lucrative drug trade have killed nearly 2,000 people this year alone.

What's in a Name?

General Barry McCaffrey, during his tenure as the director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy under President Bill Clinton, stated, “The term ‘War on Drugs’ is inadequate as a metaphor. There can be no total victory and a military campaign is the wrong path to follow. Most of the people involved in drugs are not the enemy—they are the victims.” His efforts led to a growing understanding of the requirements for and

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40 times the number of deaths attributed to al Qaeda from the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, the 2000 bombing of the USS *Cole*, and the 9/11 attacks combined. Nearly 20,000 people die from drug abuse-related causes in the United States each year, probably half of them from South American cocaine.

The drug challenge is enormous, and the underlying threat is real. Why? The simple truth is that no business in the United States is more profitable than the illicit drug trade. What is the largest cash crop in the United States? Wheat? Corn? Soybeans? Wrong. It is marijuana. In fact, the total illicit drug trade equates to a \$65 billion per year industry. When we add the resources we use to address

traffickers use extortion, bribery, and payment-in-kind to fan the flames of corruption and violence. Their actions constantly chip away at the already weak rule of law, undermining governance in our neighboring nations.

Additionally, global and regional terrorists rely on arms trafficking, money laundering, extortion, kidnap-for-ransom, and—above all—drug trafficking as their funding sources. Today, enormous profits from selling illegal drugs create huge amounts of money to finance crimes against our society. This money assists rogue states and international terrorist organizations that are determined to build and use weapons of mass destruction. In this sense, growing global demand for

Coastguardsmen aboard USCGC *Sherman* took part in record maritime seizure of cocaine from Panamanian-flagged vessel



U.S. Coast Guard

benefits of national drug treatment programs, healing the addicts to reduce the appetite for drugs that fuels the industry.

Indeed, Latin Americans often ask why we in the United States fail to do more to curb the demand. In fact, the United States does attack the challenges on the demand side. Overall, this year the Federal Government will spend over \$13 billion combating drugs, with state and municipal governments adding their own efforts. Over a third of that money is going toward programs to stop drug use before it starts and to intervene and heal habitual drug users. Drying up the demand is ultimately the best way to stop the flow of illicit drugs and help us secure our borders.

In addition to attacking the demand side of the drug problem, there is significant work on the supply side of the equation in the source countries. Programs for eradication, crop substitution, economic development, judicial and police training, and human rights education all play a part in reducing production of coca leaf. Both demand and supply efforts are vital and must continue.

Finally, alongside the important work on the demand and production side, there is opportunity to disrupt flow to the United States via *interdiction*, the process of stopping drugs moving through the transit zone between the producing countries and the market in the United States and Europe.

While actual arrests are made by law enforcement authorities such as the Coast Guard and Drug Enforcement Administration, there is a significant support role for the U.S. military involving intelligence, information, logistics, sensor operations, patrol, and force protection for law enforcement authorities engaged in interdiction activities. Our job at U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM), for example, is detection and monitoring in the transit zone and supporting our partners in law enforcement. It is a crucial mission—one that receives a significant level of attention from our headquarters.

A Vital Mission

U.S. Southern Command is the military organization focused on the 45 nations and territories of Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. The area is vast, covering over 16 million square miles—one-sixth of the Earth's surface—and it is a region that is home to over 450 million people with a variety of cultures, languages, and histories.

From the headquarters in Miami, over 1,500 people make plans and lead the military activities of tens of thousands of dedicated military and civilians who fall under one-star to three-star component commanders from each of the armed Services and the U.S. Special Operations Command. On any given day, thousands of Soldiers, Sailors, Marines, Airmen, and Coastguardsmen are deployed in many countries throughout the region. In addition, thousands more are routinely deployed in our Navy and Coast Guard ships throughout the maritime domain. At USSOUTHCOM, we work hard with the entire interagency community to develop strategically important partnerships throughout the region for counterdrug control programs.

Each year, the President develops the National Drug Control Strategy, which is the Nation's plan for combating the use and availability of illicit drugs. The National Drug Control Strategy has three key elements:

- stopping use before it starts
- intervening and healing drug users
- disrupting the market.

The fiscal year 2008 drug budget totaled nearly \$13 billion, with about \$940 million—7 percent of the overall budget—under the auspices of the Department of Defense (DOD) for counterdrug operations.

The U.S. military's role in the drug control program was first mandated by legislation in the 1989 Defense Authorization Act, which directed DOD to assume the role as the

task force's focus is both air and maritime smuggling through a 6-million-square-mile area called the transit zone. With the help of 11 partner nations, JIATF-South has evolved into a model of interagency and multinational cooperation that has achieved record-setting cocaine seizures in each of the last 6 years. Over the past 2 years, over 475 metric tons were seized, which equates to over 160 hits of cocaine for every high school student in the United States. This year, for the first time in a decade, we are beginning to see a rise in the street price of cocaine and attendant scarcity in a variety of large U.S. urban markets. Working together with demand and supply side solution sets, it seems that interdiction may be having an effect on the market. In addition, at a minimum, we know that there are 475 fewer tons of cocaine on our streets.

Innovation

Each year, in spite of our efforts, drug traffickers continue to prove that they are resourceful, dangerous, creative, and highly intelligent. The profits they receive from their business model drive adaptability and innovation, which in turn makes our job of trying to get a step ahead challenging. In the end, there seems to be no shortage of people willing to subject themselves to mortal danger or incarceration for the money drug trafficking can offer. There also seems to be no shortage of people willing to supply drugs. Worse, there seems to be no shortage of routes or methods traffickers will use to get their drugs into the United States.

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lead agency for "detection and monitoring of aerial and maritime transit of illegal drugs to the United States."

The monitoring and interdiction process is complex because it requires a mix of sophisticated technologies and capabilities. It is sensitive because of the connections that must be established for varied organizations and nations to work together without a comfortable margin of error. Interdiction also has to be dynamic; it deals with a highly capable foe with the capital to buy whatever it needs to adapt to changing circumstances.

One primary operations center for all of this is the Joint Interagency Task Force-South (JIATF-South), located in Key West. The

We see feats of innovation month after month. For instance, there are people acting as drug "mules" on commercial airplanes, ingesting up to 90 sealed pellets of cocaine or heroin. A typical mule can carry about 1.5 kilograms, enough to bring in over \$150,000 in retail sales. Also, there is the large-scale employment of semi-submersible watercraft, built to avoid detection from air and sea. A typical semi-submersible can carry between 1 and 10 metric tons of drugs. Moreover, there are creative ways to hide drugs in transport. Examples include:

- hidden in toys
- buried in iron ore

- stitched into live puppies and exotic animals
- encapsulated in the buttons of clothing
- mixed with coffee
- sealed in fruit juices and purees
- hidden in cargo holds of frozen or rotten fish
- dissolved in diesel fuel
- transformed into odorless plastic sheets, undetectable through chemical testing
- hidden in the shafts of golf clubs.

It is a boundless problem set. It is also classic 21st-century warfare—brain-on-brain combat. We must innovate in the way we think, organize, plan, and operate; in the way we adapt new technology to ever-changing challenges; and in the way we communicate, including how we describe and frame our challenges both with our partners and with the public in general.

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Clearly, in a resource-constrained world, we do not have the luxury to haphazardly throw away resources based on half-concocted notions, yet we must find ways to embrace change when it makes sense and have the courage to experiment. Like our opponents, we must constantly try new things. Now, more than ever, creative solutions are important.

To be more effective and efficient, we have to use nontraditional approaches to creating security in the region. This occurs largely by working with our regional partners abroad and interagency partners at home. We must strive to take advantage of every opportunity to build cooperative partnerships within our area of focus.

A New Kind of Ship. The high-speed vessel *Swift* embarked on a 4-month deployment in our region in the fall of 2007 for training and exchanges with partner nations. This deployment provided valuable lessons learned to help the U.S. Navy institutionalize the Global Fleet Station program, which will result in flexible forward presence options to conduct theater security cooperation activities. Although *Swift* is not a combatant in the traditional sense, its

capacity, shallow draft, and incredible speed give this ship unlimited potential.

Originally designed as a high-speed car ferry, *Swift* is a 321-foot catamaran that can perform reconnaissance, mine warfare, maritime interdiction, transport, and humanitarian assistance. It travels at well over 40 knots and has a maximum draft of only 11 feet fully loaded with over 600 tons of cargo. *Swift* is relatively inexpensive by modern standards—less than \$30 million per copy—but it is optimized for exactly the kinds of missions we do in this region, including counternarcotics. For example, with *Swift*'s speed and endurance, it can easily cover a lot of area fast—even the fastest drug running boats could not outpace it for long. Only through continued experimentation and deployment will we really be able to appreciate the incredible potential of this type of ship for use in maritime awareness and drug interdiction.

Precision-guided Intelligence. Each day, traffickers use more sophisticated communications, computer, and encryption technology to conceal operations. Moving resources at every sniff of a threat is not feasible; we need fast, flexible, and actionable intelligence that helps us pinpoint the locations where our forces and resources can do the most good and with sufficient time to get them there. To coin a phrase, we seek “precision-guided intelligence.”

Data we use to gain intelligence about drug trafficking can come from many different sources, including radar, infrared, and

visual reconnaissance assets, as well as human intelligence and databases compiled by law enforcement and customs services. In essence, we need more relevant technologies that allow all-source fusion, distributed dissemination, collaborative planning, and multiple-node sensor resource management. Here, we are looking to industry for smart solutions.

Innovation Cell Efforts. Combine all-source data fusion with inexpensive, reliable sensors, and we have the basis for true technological innovation in counterdrug efforts. At USSOUTHCOM, we have established a small innovation cell on the staff to research, explore, and test emerging technologies available commercially or through Federal research centers. In particular, the innovation cell is working closely with the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency because of its specific role in managing and directing selected basic and applied research and development projects for DOD. Through this unique partnership, we are pursuing research and technology where risk and payoff are both high and where success may provide dramatic advances for the counterdrug mission. Examples include:

- unmanned aerial systems, especially those with the legs to have good transit and loiter capability
- remote laser infrared detection and ranging for foliage penetration

Sailors prepare to unload 23 tons of illegal drugs seized during multinational and interagency operations



U.S. Navy (Susan Cornell)

- high-speed, unmanned surface vessels for detection and identification to support maritime domain awareness
- commercial satellite sensors with the ability to detect go-fast boats.

With these types of innovations, our efforts against drug trafficking will no doubt improve, but innovation is never a one-way street. With every step forward, it is only a matter of time before resourced, intelligent drug traffickers respond with innovations of their own. Such a diminished effectiveness of each innovative leap over time is the exact reason why, at U.S. Southern Command, we must constantly strive for ways to do our job better.

Interagency Integration. Today, no single arm of the Federal Government has the ability or authority to coordinate the multiple entities required to execute an effective international antidrug campaign. But with just a little imagination, we can envision an operational fusion of the best capabilities provided by joint, U.S. interagency, international, and public-private organizations that seamlessly coordinates efforts to tackle drugs at every stage from source point to the streets. With such a capability at hand, even the most creative drug kingpins would be at a loss to accept the risks of continuing their trade. At U.S. Southern Command, we have begun a headquarters reorganization to accomplish this vision, which involves restructuring the large staff to optimize our interagency approach. It includes many new liaisons and

personnel exchanges, as well as building directorates with interagency linkages.

A perfect example of an interagency approach is our partnering with DEA to leverage the technology, infrastructure, and legal domains required for real time leads to support drug trafficking interdiction and arrests. Our law enforcement agencies, including DEA, rely on sophisticated tools to stop major drug trafficking organizations. DEA has also developed advanced methods to compile investigative information, which ensures that all leads are properly followed and coordinated through its Special Operations Division (SOD). This mechanism allows all DEA field divisions and foreign offices to capitalize on investigative information from various sources on the spot as cases are developed. Numerous major Federal law enforcement cases have already been developed with the assistance of the SOD, which is increasingly a central player in cocaine, methamphetamine, and heroin investigations. Through an innovative partnership with DEA—and with other interagency partners—we hope to reap similar benefits in the drug-interdiction realm.

Innovative Communications. The essence of interdicting drugs is communicating fused intelligence where and when it is needed. The time is right to expand our technology base for building partnerships—to build upon a long history of friendship and cooperation—especially in a region where our position is largely won by words and trust, not bullets and missiles. At USSOUTHCOM, we

have already started this process by providing a common communication system called the Combined Enterprise Regional Information Exchange System (CENTRIXS) to many of our partner nations. Each CENTRIXS node is part of a secure computer network that enhances operational situational awareness for everyone who is part of the link. It is connected with another innovative counter-narcotics communication system known as the Counter-narcotic Information Exchange System (CNIES). We will continue to explore innovative communication strategies to increase interdiction efforts.

A Look to the Future

At U.S. Southern Command, we work to develop strategically important partnerships throughout the region for source-country drug control programs and interdiction. The primary aim of these efforts has been to limit the availability of illicit drugs such as cocaine to drive up prices and discourage use. This is hard and important work, done at a very reasonable cost. Consider it a hedge to ensure that our Latin American and Caribbean neighbors remain friends and partners with whom we will continue to engage productively and sensibly.

Clearly, the drug threat to the United States is of enormous size and importance. It needs to be treated as such through a variety of solutions. Much of the work to be done is on the demand side, and there is a wide variety of policy ideas out there to address demand. On the supply side, there is much that can be done with producing nations to discourage growth and processing. Our focus in the military on detection and monitoring is likewise a part of the solution set. We should devote more resources to the problem of drugs in every dimension—demand, supply, and interdiction.

With a land and air border that extends over 7,500 miles, a maritime exclusive economic zone encompassing 3.4 million square miles, a vast number of people admitted into the United States every year, more than 11 million trucks and 2 million rail cars crossing our borders, and 7,500 foreign-flag ships making 51,000 calls in U.S. ports every year, it is easy to be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the drug challenge—if we think sequentially and in isolation.

But together, we can think, act, and work in parallel to solve the dilemma—by building partnerships that keep our borders open to legitimate trade and travel, while reducing the threat of drugs throughout our society. **JFQ**

